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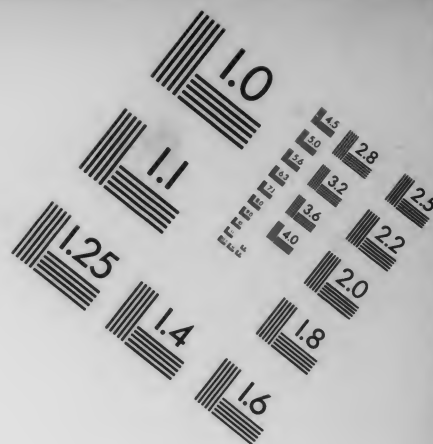
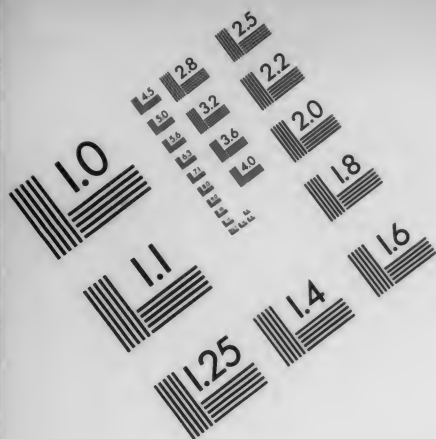


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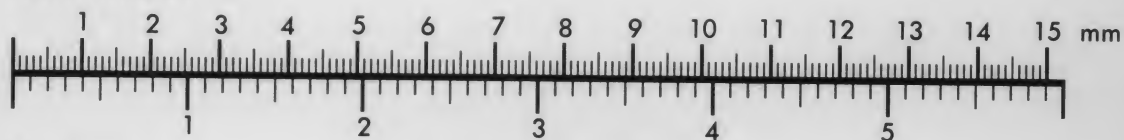
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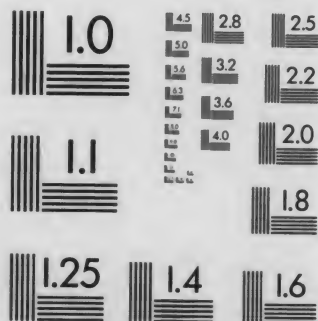
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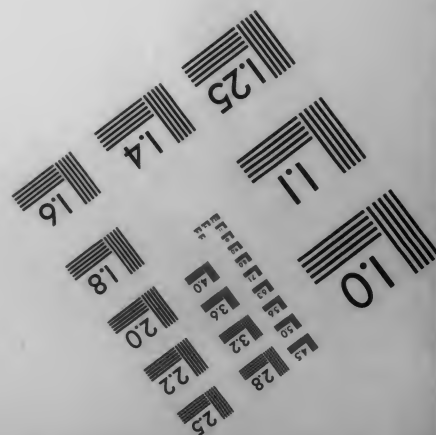
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AUGUSTE COMTE AND ONE OF HIS CRITICS.



## AUGUSTE COMTE AND ONE OF HIS CRITICS.

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IN the number of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* for November, 1896, there appeared an article by Mr. W. H. Schoff, entitled "A Neglected Chapter in the Life of Comte." The main object proposed to himself by the author of the article would seem to have been to convince his readers that the Philosophy of Comte and his Religion are contradictory. Being one of those who accept both, and therefore recognise no contradiction between them, I should have been glad to see a real attempt to show their inconsistency; the attempt would have been unsuccessful, but its failure would have been instructive, and interesting views might possibly have been elicited in the course of the discussion. I think, however, no one who has read the article, even if he be disposed to welcome that conclusion, can believe that Mr. Schoff has done anything towards establishing it. It is, indeed, repeatedly asserted in the article that the two are at variance, but I find nothing that really goes to prove that they are so. Into that general question, accordingly, it is not necessary at present to enter.\* But there are some statements of Mr. Schoff's, which have gone out to the public, and which, if they were received as correct, might predispose a good many minds unacquainted with Positivism, either against that doctrine or against its author; and I have therefore thought it right to point out that they misrepresent the facts to which they relate.

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\* On this question I would refer the reader to "The Unity of Comte's Life and Doctrine" (Trübner, 1866), by Dr. J. H. Bridges.



1. Mr. Schoff's account of Comte's early years is in two particulars inaccurate. His philosophic training is attributed to the *École Polytechnique*, which really gave only special scientific teaching,—not, as it ought to be, to Comte's indefatigable private studies. And the protest which led, not to his "dismissal," but to the temporary dissolution of the school, was not, as is implied, of a political character, but was directed against the impertinences, or, to use M. Littré's phrase, the "manières blessantes" of a *repetiteur*.

2. Mr. Schoff goes at some length into the question of the nature and extent of the influence exercised by Saint-Simon on Comte in the early years of the latter. Now, I have a quite fixed opinion on this subject, which does not accord with Mr. Schoff's; and not only so, but I have long since made up my mind as to the philosophical merits and personal character of that showy, but shallow and unprincipled, adventurer. Anyone who wishes for satisfaction on these points will find ample materials, taken from Saint-Simon's own writings, in a few pages of the Appendix to Dr. Robinet's *Notice sur la vie et l'œuvre d'Auguste Comte*.<sup>\*</sup> But this controversy as to his relations with Saint-Simon is one of secondary interest. The great question, fraught with really vital consequences, is—What are we to think of Comte himself and of the body of thought he has bequeathed to mankind? It would be a matter of regret if any issue of a subordinate kind, such as this respecting Saint-Simon, were to turn aside the attention of competent minds from the study of his Philosophy and Religion.

3. After some extraordinary remarks on what he seems to consider the intellectually debasing influences of the daily reading of Dante and Thomas à Kempis, which Comte is known to have practised (why he adds St. Augustine I cannot guess, though Comte, doubtless, had read, as I suppose we all have, the *De Civitate Dei* and the *Confessions* of that great man), Mr.

<sup>\*</sup> It may be remarked, *a propos* of what Mr. Schoff says of Comte's feelings towards the medical profession, that Dr. Robinet was his esteemed and trusted physician.

Schoff tells us that the philosopher's passion for Madame de Vaux, "a devoted mystic," "carried him still further from his original design." Nothing could be farther from the truth than this description of Madame de Vaux. If Mr. Schoff will read her correspondence with Comte, of which he appears to have no knowledge, he will find that she was a highly cultivated and *spirituelle* lady, fully alive to all the influences of contemporary intellectual life. She might more justly be described as having been, before her acquaintance with Comte, a Voltairian. He awakened in her an interest in Positivism, but their friendship of a year did not suffice to put her in full possession of the doctrine. Her importance in his history and in that of Positivism lies in the fact that through her his profoundly emotional nature, which in consequence of his deplorable domestic situation had been insufficiently developed, was stirred into new life, and thus a tenderness and depth were given to the moral and religious side of his teaching which it might not otherwise have attained. It is this that will make her name to be for ever associated with his in the minds and hearts of his disciples.

4. Mr. Schoff tells us, in words which might seem to imply that it was a part of Comte's thought, that his system, in order to reach the efficiency of that which preceded it, and which it sought to replace, "must be taught by a spiritual power as absolute as that of Rome." This is a favourite artifice of the opponents of Positivism—to turn against it the dislike of Protestants for Catholicism, by representing it as aiming at the establishment of an intellectual tyranny, such as is commonly attributed to the mediæval Church. Now it will not be alleged that Positivism proposes to invoke the secular arm in support of its principles; and if it be remembered that it has not at its command the spiritual weapons of supernatural hopes and terrors which the armoury of Catholicism contained, but must rely exclusively, first on individual conviction, and finally on social opinion, accepting a demonstrable doctrine, it will be seen that this pretended alarm is simply a bugbear conjured up to turn away from the new Synthesis the less clear-sighted members of the community.

5. Mr. Schoff suggests that Comte, after his cerebral crisis in 1826, "never quite recovered his mental balance." The object of this insinuation, not now for the first time made, is to throw a shadow of discredit over his later works in the minds of persons who do not read them. Comte foresaw that his temporary malady would be used in this way, and he gave at the same time his moral judgment as to the worthiness of such a *tactique*. To those who knew Comte in his later years, and who have read his correspondences with Madame de Vaux and with several of his disciples, which have been published since his death, the "suspicion" that he "did not retain all his faculties" is as ridiculous as it is odious. In spite of every attempt that has been made to depreciate the *Politique Positive*, it remains true that it is his greatest work, as it is also the greatest work that has ever been written on the Science of Society.

6. According to Mr. Schoff, Comte's "religion, or, at least, his polity, found its adherents among the extreme Socialists." I should be glad to believe that he had exercised this influence; but the statement can scarcely be correct, the *Politique* being strongly opposed to their chimerical schemes, though it treats with just respect the aims of honest and single-minded members of the party. Comte, in fact, expected that his doctrine would first commend itself to public men by showing itself to be the only one that could effectually combat Socialism. Can Mr. Schoff name any extreme Socialist who has adopted the principles of the *Politique*? If there be any such, they must have ceased to be Socialists.

7. It is known that John Stuart Mill declared Comte to be, in his opinion, equal, or indeed superior, to Descartes and Leibnitz. This verdict is a special offence to Mr. Schoff, who thinks he ought rather to be compared to Paracelsus. Here is his comment on Mill's judgment:—"He (Mill) would probably have done so" (*i.e.* expressed the opinion in question) "less readily, had he known that Comte had already signed himself Brutus Bonaparte, and even at the time that Mill wrote, was comparing his services to Society with those of St. Paul and Aristotle." Why Mill's estimate of Comte's philosophic genius should have been affected

by his having signed himself "Brutus Bonaparte" during the period of his insanity (a circumstance which Mr. Schoff judiciously keeps in the back ground) it is not easy to see; and as to the words of the following clause "at the time when Mill wrote," I thought every one knew that Mill's *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, to which Mr. Schoff refers, was not written till Comte had been nearly eight years in his grave! From one who looks on Comte *de haut en bas*, like Mr. Schoff, much respect cannot be expected for Mill; but I must be pardoned if I think that he could know a great man when he was brought into mental contact with him, and that his deliberate estimate, formed in spite of large differences of opinion, was likely to be right.

8. Mr. Schoff says:—Comte, in 1822, "promised three series of works: first, a historical basis for a positive science of politics; second, a system of positive education based on this science, but preaching it in an imaginative way; third, an explanation of the principles of collective action by men over nature. The attempted fulfilment of the first promise is found in the *Cours* [de Philosophie Positive]; of the second, in the *Système* [de Politique Positive]; of the third, nowhere." There is here a confusion which betrays a very superficial acquaintance with Comte's author-life. The facts are as follows:—The positive science of politics, first drafted in the fourth, fifth, and sixth volumes of the *Philosophie*, was fully worked out in the *Politique*, in which the Religion of Humanity is also expounded. The system of positive education was to have been set forth in the *Système de Morale positive, ou Traité de l'Education universelle*, which Comte hoped to give to the world in 1859. He only lived long enough to begin this treatise; fortunately the plan of it has been preserved, and much of what was intended to be included in it is broadly indicated in the *Politique*. The work on the collective action of man on nature, which he intended to be his last systematic treatise, *Système d'industrie positive, ou Traité de l'action totale de l'Humanité sur sa planète* projected for 1861, was, of course, never begun. All this is clearly explained in the last *Leçon* of the *Philosophie* and in the *Conclusion Totale* of the *Politique*.

9. But the most serious misstatement in Mr. Schoff's article

remains to be mentioned. He says—"In the general wreck" (which is purely imaginary), "Comte clung to enough of his past thought to prevent him from becoming a believer in theology; so that all that was left him was to return to the miserable foolery of the Saint-Simonian school, from which he had separated in 1824. Yet in 1829 he had written to his friend Eichthal (who was about to take the same step) that, rather than become a Saint-Simonian, it would be far better to return to the Catholic Church." Now this certainly implies that Comte became a Saint-Simonian, as we know Gustave d'Eichthal did—which is quite false. It is, besides, inconsistent with the admission that Comte did not become a believer in theology, for the *Nouveau Christianisme* of Saint-Simon, which expresses belief in Christianity as "of divine origin," had appeared in 1824, and the school was distinctly theological. It is a curious incidental evidence of Mr. Schoff's habit of inaccuracy that Comte did not say to Eichthal what is put into his mouth, though he might justly have said it. What he really said was—that a mind so naturally strong as Eichthal's could not rest satisfied with the "vague pantheism" which was indicated by his correspondence, but would either return to the positive state or fall back entirely on Catholicism. "Dans l'un et l'autre cas," he adds, "la discussion sera plus nette."

Two services have certainly been rendered by Mr. Schoff's article. He has called attention to Comte's early writings, and, amongst them, to that unparalleled production of a young man of twenty-four, the *Plan des travaux nécessaires pour réorganiser la société*; and he has clearly pointed out that, in these essays of his youth, he already distinctly drew the plan of the social enterprise to which his entire course was with undeviating steadiness directed, and also of the philosophical construction which was the condition precedent of that enterprise.

Let me, in closing, express the hope that earnest-minded men, and especially earnest-minded youths, amongst our American brethren, will not allow themselves to be drawn away by second-hand accounts of Comte's doctrine, or by criticisms often prejudiced and not seldom inspired by an

ill-concealed rancour, from the direct and serious study of the writings of a man who stands in the front rank of thinkers, and who, in the opinion of a large and growing number of persons, will ultimately be recognised as one of the great social renovators and religious leaders of the world.

JOHN K. INGRAM.

DUBLIN, March, 1897.

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For the benefit of those, possibly still too numerous in America, as they unfortunately are in these islands, who do not read French with facility, it may be mentioned that the essential features of Comte's system may be learned from the *Catéchisme Positiviste*, or from the *Discours Préliminaire* of the *Politique Positive*, the former of which has been translated by Dr. Congreve, and the latter by Dr. Bridges under the title, *A general View of Positivism*. By those who wish to enter more fully into his thought, the four volumes of the *Politique Positive* may be read in English. The *Philosophie Positive* may be studied in Miss Martineau's condensed rendering, which has recently been re-edited by Mr. Frederic Harrison.





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